

A Social Scientist Among Technicians

Ian Hamnett

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Ian Hamnett* ¹

Article

More and more people recognise that the social scientist has an important role to play in technological change; fewer (outside the academic world) have any very clear idea of what this role should be. I have just completed a period of about two and a half years as a part-time consultant sociologist to a large and expensive UN study mission charged with drawing up a comprehensive plan for the development of the soil and water resources of a small country in southern Africa. My experience over this time has prompted some thoughts on the relationship between the sociologist and other team members in a project of this kind, where nearly all the fieldworkers and consultants are in the nature of things engineers, agronomists and accountants, and where the social scientist's presence can almost be regarded as a luxury or even prestige item which only a 'progressive' or 'sophisticated' firm of engineering consultants would think it desirable to employ. Neither his employers nor his technical colleagues see the sociologist's role as he sees it himself; moreover, the discrepancies between their perceptions conceal some remarkable and even dangerous *absences* in the planning and developmental process.

Initially, I found that I was expected to discharge three principal tasks in the feasibility study. First, I was asked to assess the will and ability of subsistence cultivators to accept and profit from development, in particular from intensive irrigated agriculture. The implied assumption was not only that there existed an esoteric technique for the objective assessment and evaluation of 'attitudes' to intensive agriculture among people who had no experience of it, but further that such 'attitudes' were somehow ultimate givens, explicable in the last resort (if indeed explicable at all, which was doubted) in terms either (pessimistically) of 'conservatism', 'superstition', 'laziness', etc, or (optimistically) of the opposites of these traits. My own methodology diverged sharply. My working assumption was (and is) that attitudes are best treated as effects not causes, and that on the whole men should be taken to act 'rationally' in their situation. Like Samuel Butler, 'I have ever been of the opinion that the greater part of mankind do approximately know where they get that which makes them good' (Erewhon chap 15). If my scepticism about attitudes as explanations clearly surprised my engineering colleagues, my 'rationalist' bias was either regarded as starry-eyed liberalism of an amusing but hardly serious kind or else explained away by the argument that even if the subsistence cultivators were acting rationally according to their lights, those lights were very dim.

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Thus, the second part of my brief was to advise on how the rural population could be induced (if at all) to emerge from their primitive darkness and non-understanding and to open their eyes to the advantages which development would bring. Here again, there was the implication that attitudes were fundamental and that the important question was how they could be manipulated. Now obviously I would not have been engaged in this work at all if I did not believe that the people would indeed gain from an appropriate development; but I did not share the engineers' belief that native suspicion of change was simply and unequivocally due to their ignorance any more than it was due to their supposed 'irrationality'. In the particular case involved, indeed, the lessons of the previous century had shown how easily land 'development' could lead to the loss of national land as a communal resource. Few feel secure enough to trust themselves to a European venture which looks not unlike similar ventures in the past. (Then, the result had been the expropriation of the indigenous owners and their reduction to the status of casual labourers, the consequence of a long series of 'concessions', for which the African Kings were themselves partly responsible.) The upshot, in any event, is that nearly half the land resources of the nation are held on so-called title-deed tenure, nearly all of this being in European hands.

But, more generally, I am not convinced that even where such risks can be excluded, the people are either irrational or ignorant in reading their situation as they do. Subsistence cultivation not only appears to be but often is 'zero-sum'; one man's gain tends to be another's loss, where even a small economic advantage can create a debtor relationship and where agricultural success can result in the withdrawal of an intensively cultivated holding from the national (tribal) patrimony. Where people are very poor they are not foolish or ignorant in their refusal to take risks – they are eminently sensible and wise. It is better to be reasonably sure of a bare sufficiency than to chance a loss this year in the hope of plenty the year after. Some of my colleagues failed to appreciate the narrowness of the margin that lay between subsistence and real destitution among the people for whom we were supposed to be working. The economic conservatism of the subsistence cultivators appeared to them precisely as a set of irrational attitudes rather than as a functional response to a real-life situation of scarcity. Thus, they found the social-structural pressures acting against 'possessive individualism' (in Macpherson's sense) unintelligible and unworthy of serious attention.²

Thirdly, having excluded some forms of development as unworkable in the light of native 'attitudes', I was expected to make recommendations as to how the remaining engineering proposals could best be given effect to in sociological terms. The sociologist was in a way thus seen as social technician, whose function was subsidiary to and derivative from that of the engineers and accountants: the latter specified all the goals and some of the means, the former only a few of the means and one of the goals. I could tell them what could not (or probably could not) be done, and I could indicate the best (i.e. least troublesome) way of doing what could be done; but I could not really *originate* proposals or

recommendations that were thought to rest on what were called 'sociological factors' alone. Although this may seem the most innocuous of the three engineering conceptions of the sociologist's role, I think that in fact it is the most alarming of them, and it is one that raises some interesting and fundamental questions. 'Sociological factors' or 'social factors' (no distinction was drawn) were thought of as residual items, as a remainder left over when hydrological, agronomic, constructional and accounting problems had been solved or at least taken account of. Although this is not the place to develop an argument against such a misunderstanding, the consequences of this view deserve some elaboration.

The most serious of these consequences was that certain crucial areas of decision-making were made to shrink almost to vanishing point. It became quite literally impossible, within the framework of these assumptions, to make certain kinds of decision at all, or even to see that there were decisions to be made, since they were defined away from the reach of any of the collaborative disciplines and consigned to the 'catch-all' category of 'policy': a realm from which all trespassers were to be excluded. Decisions that were made on engineering or accounting grounds were not regarded as involving 'policy': they counted as 'objective' recommendations, which it was up to the Cabinet to override if for any reason they disliked them. As a sociologist I could intervene only by producing reasons against a particular form of development on the grounds that it would not 'work' in the light of known prejudices or preferences among the people. But I was not really expected to argue that there were sociological grounds *of any other kind* for adopting (say) smallholdings and rejecting (say) commercial estates as the dominant form of development. At least initially it was supposed that estate development resting on wage-labour, rather than on homestead smallholdings operated so far as possible in accordance with customary tenurial norms, would yield a larger and prompter financial return; certainly it would be more open to direct 'rational' management.

It was often hard to find a point of entry for some of the questions I wanted to ask. Who, in fact, would gain? Would the fruits of development really be more widely spread when the general quality of rural life in local terms of reference was not so much enhanced as degraded, even though the GNP might be marginally increased and a larger quantity of vegetables and other fresh foodstuffs exported to (say) Durban and Pietermaritzburg? The problem was that if the engineers and accountants wanted commercial estates, then to contradict their 'objective' view was to raise evaluative and 'political' questions which lay outside the field of the study mission. It was, therefore, assumed that to give overriding priority to engineering and (in a limited sense) economic factors was 'non-political', and that 'politics' or 'policy decisions' entered into the matter only where these factors were to any degree displaced. At the back of this was the belief that while ministers and civil servants (of course) needed instruction on technical matters, they needed none on 'sociological' ones, since they were taken to know their own society better than any outsider could. This not only of course contradicts the

sociologist's view of his role, but also overlooks the fact that local decision-makers themselves tend to constitute a partial group within the indigenous society, and that their interests and perspectives are neither privileged nor irreformable. For the sociologist, the Cabinet's view of the society is only one piece of evidence among many, and while invaluable as data has no special claim to respect at the level of analysis.

I believe that at times I was more aware of the impact that certain changes might have on the local society than some members of that society guessed at. A minister would profess in all sincerity to set a high value on the egalitarian and 'solidary' characteristics of traditional social organisation, but fail to see, for instance, that the introduction of commercial and individual tenure into native land-holdings would threaten these values. As has been said, 'there is no surer way of depriving a peasant of his land than to give him a registered title'.³ The probable effects in this case are no doubt obvious to many, but I found that I could not take it for granted that local politicians always appreciated points of this kind. Though certainly I did not regard it as my function to tell African authorities what they 'ought to want', I nevertheless saw it as part of my role to indicate that what they wanted might be contradicted rather than achieved by certain kinds of lower-level policy. In other words, I felt able to point to some of the 'unintended consequences of deliberate acts'. In this way, 'policy' too fell within my role as I saw it; but my colleagues, on the whole, did not see it this way. For them, my arguments too often seemed 'evaluative' rather than 'scientific' – itself a frame of reference which to me rather seemed to over-simplify matters.

Development planning thus tended to be polarised into two contrasting forms – on the one hand, the strictly technical, which lay within the purview of engineers and accountants, and on the other, the 'policymaking' which was referred to Cabinet and treated as simply a constraint. This had the effect of obscuring the fact that at every turn policy decisions were being covertly and invisibly made, smuggled in without proper consideration or even awareness within the interstices of cost-benefit analysis and loan repayment schedules. For example, a high initial repayment would saddle incoming settlers with a heavy burden just when they were least able to bear it. A rising rate would undermine the looked-for continuous improvement in living standards as time passed. But to fund the debt in the government's hands meant making a 'political' recommendation, since it would in effect require the advanced sector of the economy to carry the financial operation over the hump through its contributions to general revenue; this therefore meant looking at the proposed development in the context of the total economic and social structure of the country, a commitment which was arguably outside the remit of the research project. It also involved (ultimately) a consideration of the workings of an economy so intimately linked with south Africa that no independent appraisal of its balance of payments position is possible, since there are no financial controls on the export of money or capital.

There was then, a very real danger that the resultant recommendations would emerge as being highly 'political', but that this character would be disguised by the fact that the 'politics' involved were of a highly economistic kind. They would also simply reinforce the existing polarities of rich and poor and do little more than bring a few black faces into the category of the (relatively) rich. In the event, this did not happen, or at least not to the degree that at one point I feared. This was perhaps partly due to my own resistance to the pressures built into the structure of the research, but also to the passivity and lack of interest shown by the government, which had the unlooked-for effect of compelling a greater explicit attention to matters of 'policy' on the part of the team. But though it seemed clear to me from the start that decisions which would tend to perpetuate and even aggravate existing inequalities were fully as 'political' as decisions that worked against them, this was not a view of the matter that I found it easy to make intelligible to the others involved. It was, incidentally, interesting to find that where matters of 'technical rationality' were involved, the engineering experts would happily make recommendations of a fairly radical kind without any discomfort: for instance, to nationalise all water rights.

I do not wish to suggest that the blame for the kind of situation that I have partially described lies simply with the engineers. There is no particular reason why an engineer should know what a sociologist either purports or hopes to do until the sociologist tells him; the latter, therefore, has to explain his role as he sees it to members of other disciplines and avocations. There has been a large literature on the sociology of development, but (so far as I know) very little on the sociology of development *work*, and the problems that arise in interdisciplinary collaboration. It is too easily assumed that we all talk the same language because we all speak English (or French, or Russian, or whatever). What is still needed is a study of the sociology of technical development from the point of view of what goes on *inside* study missions and research teams. This would help, perhaps, to create a greater awareness of the distortions that can be introduced into 'expert' recommendations by the internal structure of the teams and the misunderstandings that result from people's ignorance of each other's skills and methods.

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¹ Ian Hamnett is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bristol.

² Macpherson (1962).

³ Simpson (1967); see also Sawyerr (1969).